



Filipina Lesbians Using Downelink to Forge their Identities and Communities

by Danicar Mariano

The way LGBTQs (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders, and Queers) use the internet gives insight into how people from marginalised communities use media to create communities that serve as countercultures to dominant culture. By linking together online, they are showing their solidarity and sense of imagined community with others like them. This helps facilitate a cultural exchange, and transfers useful information that may or may not be readily available in the heterosexist environments that surround them.

A recent survey in the States conducted by market research firm Harris Interactive suggests that gay and lesbian adults online today are among the most loyal and frequent blog readers and social network users – more so than their straight counterparts (Wauters, 2010). For instance, out of total respondents, nearly 73% or three-quarters of gay and lesbian adult respondents, can be found on Facebook, as compared to 65% of heterosexual adults.

Also, 32% of gay and lesbian respondents report being members of MySpace, compared to 22% of heterosexuals. Consequently, Jeff Dawson, author of the book “Gay and Lesbian Online” believes that online personals and websites for LGBTQs are replacing bars or downtown clubs in the United States. He states that “Guys and gals who cruise clubs and bars for love or lust are staying home and cruising the Web.”

Could the Philippines be seeing a similar trend? If the popularity of Downlink is any indication, then it appears so.

What's Downlink?

Downlink is a social networking site much like Facebook or MySpace; but what sets it apart from other social networking sites is that it caters specifically to LGBTQs. Downlink began in Sunnydale, California. Its original founders are party organisers and LGBTQ advocates.

Recently, the site was bought by Logo, an MTV network subsidiary catering to the LGBTQ community — most likely because it wishes to tap into its market, which has more than 485,226 LGBTQ users. It is reported that 72% of Downlink users are Latino, African American, and/or Asian.

Downlink is also extremely popular among Filipina lesbians; so much so, that urbandictionary.com defines the word “Downe” as:

A person who identifies as homosexual, gay, bisexual, or queer. Frequently used within Filipino American and Asian American LGBT communities.

(Origins: California? Or Hawaii?)

{Usage:} “Are you downe?”

One reason for the definition can undoubtedly be attributed to the popularity of Downlink among Filipina lesbians in diaspora. Indeed, Downlink's proliferation and popularity in the Philippines can very likely be traced to Filipino/a American LGBTQ users and the relationships they have or forged with LGBTQ persons back in the Philippines.

Upon signing up, aside from the usual questions about personal information, there is a portion that asks one's sexual orientation and gives the following options: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, bicurious, queer, or “downe.” Thus, even with users hiding their actual name, Downlink provides many LGBTQs the opportunity to come out, categorise themselves

as non-straight or at the very least – should they choose to skip answering it – reflect on the categories. Moreover, the category of “downe” allows them to define themselves as LGBTQ in a subtle, non-threatening and non-politicised way.

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Moreover, I observed that on average, most Filipina lesbians would have around 100 - 200 “friends” linked to them with active users getting at least two invites daily. This demonstrates the website's appeal to a wide market. For many Filipina lesbians, Downlink.com is a space where they can meet other Filipina lesbians and interact with them online in a way that was never quite possible before.

Why Downlink?

I did a cyber ethnography of Downlink by observing the profiles of its users from 2006 - 2007 as well as interviewed avid users of the site about why they maintain their accounts. The responses from participants varied. One respondent, a closeted lesbian, said that Downlink provides assurance that only fellow LGBTQs will get to view the blog, whether or not this is actually true. Another respondent said that she feels, “...much more freedom here than on other sites.” Similarly, a Filipina lesbian activist, remarked that she posts blogs in Downlink because it could be read by like-minded women who “get the point right away.” She also believes the site is more private and apt for LGBTQ interests.

Some respondents also explained that unlike expensive bars, which are inconvenient to go to, Downlink is free and literally at the tip of one's fingertips. Moreover, lesbian events or “women's exclusive parties,” often start very late making it difficult for young Filipinas who have restrictive

curfews to attend them. In contrast, Downelink is convenient and can be accessed at any given time of the day. More importantly, it is much less risky than being seen in bar, especially for people who remain closeted.

The Couple's Page

Having looked at over 200 profiles at Downelink.com, a common theme that may be observed is the inclination of Filipina lesbians to create what I call a “couple’s page,” owned and maintained by both partners, and are usually peppered with their photos. In a joint page, partners can choose to declare their relationship status as married and can openly declare love and devotion to one another in each other’s testimonials, which are often followed by supportive comments from other lesbians.

In my view, couples create a page together for 2 reasons. First, it is likely that the users want to declare how crucial their partner is to both of their identity construction. It is also a way to show how proud one is of the relationship, especially in Philippine society where lesbian relationships are often ignored, if not shunned. I believe that the capacity to choose marriage as the relationship status on ones’ page also serves a crucial function for lesbians, who, though denied of the possibility of any conventional marriage, can reveal their level of commitment. Two respondents, for instance, have taken to calling each other “wife” after they’ve indicated their status as married. In other words, Downelink’s status option could potentially validate lesbian relationships, making it visible and deserving of acknowledgment – a key function of matrimony.

Another possible explanation for the prevalence of couples page’s is that it could be used to assuage the jealousy of ones’ partner, somewhat serving as proof that ones’ profile will not be used to hook-up with another. Since having a single status in Downelink generally means that one is available, it is necessary for coupled lesbians to show that they are only there for friends. Often, other lesbians also soothe this

fear by showing that they, too, acknowledge the relationship.

Butch-Femme Dynamics

The couples page phenomenon appears to replicate the dynamics one would see in lesbian bars or exclusive parties where women would often be seen hand in hand with their partner or in a group. Since femmes (or feminine looking lesbians) are sometimes invisible to Filipino society, which often only considers butches (or masculine looking lesbians) as the real lesbians, their sexual orientation is only revealed by being with a butch either one-on-one or in a group. Downelink, however, provides an opportunity for femmes to be acknowledged and labeled as “real lesbians,” on their own by flagging themselves as lesbian in their profile.

Downelink offers Filipinas the opportunity to either subscribe to or rebel against the butch-femme dynamics. This is because the site offers a vast potential for interaction with greater opportunities for self-fashioning, making Filipinas reflect if they identify as butch or femme, refuse to identify with it, or at least ask what this means. Others resist labels by writing their own description of themselves. One profile emphasizes, “Stop asking if I’m butch or femme okay. I am neither.” On the other hand, some



Philippine party and events organisers that target the lesbian community are also taking advantage of Downelink's popularity by posting their events on Downelink's Bulletin Board, or sending private messages to people

take the opportunity to declare how, even though they accept the general category of "lesbian" as a label, this label does not necessarily categorise them neatly.

Although butch-femme dynamics are very much alive in Downelink, there is a growing self-reflexivity about it. In a blog on Downelink, one Filipina defends her preference for butch girls when asked by her friend "Why can't you just go for a real man?" In response, she emphasizes, "because even if she's really butch... she's still a woman!" This highly enlightened articulation separates the notion of sex from gender with the blogger distinguishing biology from the performance of identity. For example, even if she's butch (her performance of gender), she's still a woman (her sex). Indeed, the script reveals a growing awareness of the fluidity of gender.

Party Organisers Use Downelink to Reach their Market

Philippine party and events organisers that target the lesbian community are also taking advantage of Downelink's popularity by posting their events on Downelink's Bulletin Board, or sending private messages to people. A marketing assistant for a lesbian party organiser said they usually expect around 500 - 600 people to attend the bigger parties, especially if it has been advertised for quite some time.

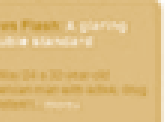
These parties can either be seen as empowering or problematic. Some parties organised through Downelink feature scantily clad sexy dancers which brings to light the issue of the objectification of women's bodies. Furthermore, some of the parties perpetuate the

butch-femme dynamics with the strippers asking butches to dance with them. The dancers are also often less well off than the lesbians that watch them, as proven by the 250 - 450 Philippine pesos (around 5 - 10 US dollars) fee at the entrance. This raises the issue of the internet increasing people's capacity to objectify women, which now is not just open to men, but available to women as well. This is reflected by the reality that respondents from Downelink emphasize that putting swimsuit photos of yourself on your profile not only attracts more invites but lewd comments from fellow women.

All these politically incorrect practices in Downelink compel some Filipina lesbian activists to shun the site, asserting that the lesbians there have no political consciousness. This is reminiscent of the divide that plagued the Philippine lesbian community, even before the rise of the internet. Philippine lesbian activists would sometimes sneer at bar going lesbians, labeling them as "capitalists who do nothing to change the system."

Outreach and Advocacy in Downelink

Although commercial lesbian parties or "women's exclusives" problematise whether Downelink and the gatherings it helps promote facilitate true women's empowerment, Task Force Pride, the group that organises the Annual Pride Marches in the country, is appropriating the popularity of these gatherings-using them to promote fund raising parties for the Pride March. Party organisers in Downelink have also sponsored socially-oriented causes in the past. For example, Lez Pinay offered a free livelihood and crafts-making seminar for underprivileged lesbians, publicised through the site. Another example is was the organising of an L word benefit for breast cancer in 2006. Aside from parties, discussion and meet-up groups are promoted using Downelink's bulletin boards. An example of this is the "Dyke Dialogues", a discussion on gender identification and relationship dynamics and how these issues determine the Philippine LGBTQ advocacy landscape.



Lesbian groups involved in social and political advocacy are also visible on Downelink. Lunduyan ng Sining (or Sanctuary of Art), for instance, is a lesbian cultural and artistic group. They launch cultural projects that feature lesbian performers and writers using Downelink. Ang Ladlad, the LGBTQ political party, gets occasional messages of support and approval as well as regular friend invites from the site. Rainbow Rights Project, an academic think tank and a legal resource center, also has a profile on the site. The presence of these groups on the site show that Downelink not only serves personal functions, but political ones as well.

Conclusion: Claiming Spaces of their Own

Downelink creates a perceived climate of safety and space for Filipina lesbians, giving them an avenue to connect and share experiences with like-minded women. While some lesbians choose to remain anonymous, Downelink, at the very least, compels them to question and reflect on their sexual orientation. For many, this provides

their first foray out of the closet. Filipinas are also using Downelink to shape their identities. In Philippine society where femmes are often not considered “real lesbians”, it provides femmes space to define their sexuality apart from their butch partners, if they even choose to conform to butch-femme roles. The Downelink interface also gives them an opportunity to articulate and perhaps even reflect on the differences between sex and gender. Downelink also enables Filipinas to mingle and meet like-minded women apart from their usual cliques and circles, both online and in the flesh. Downelink facilitates the creation of an online community which becomes tangible through parties, discussions, cultural events and pride marches announced and publicised through the site. ♦

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